

## VECU project, part „Proverbs“

### 5. Proverbs and religions.

In this text proverbs are defined as „set expressions, generally known, expressing wisdom and advice for life, in precise short form. (In accordance with Wolfgang Mieder and Lutz Röhrig)

Proverbs are tied with religion in different ways: On the one hand as to their origin – many of them being quotations of religious texts – on the other hand as to the message, which has been introduced into every day conversation, without evidence of the religious roots.

In times without knowledge of writing and reading the proverb was a practical way to transfer culture and advice for life from one generation to the next, because the precise short form was easy to be learned by heart.

After the introduction of compulsory school attendance in European countries education was often under religious control, so obviously religious and cultural values were transmitted by quotation of religious texts and proverbs, often learning by heart.

Even before, in Germany the protestant reformers established elementary schools within their communities and the Catholics soon followed.

„Still a long time the elementary schools were based on church communities. Separation had been completed only just in the 20th century....“ (14)

In the Austrian Monarchy the Emperor Joseph II also used and developed the existing network of parishes to implement compulsory school attendance.

For example the composer Anton Bruckner, as a young teacher, was responsible to his parish priest.

#### 1) The Book of Proverbs of the First (Old) Testament.

Looking for the origin of proverbs you must not forget the „Book of Proverbs“.(3)

It is worth to be noticed, that in German the name of the „Buch der Sprüche“ was discussed to be changed to „Buch der Sprichwörter (Book of Proverbs)“, as it is usual in English and French, because this wording is representing better the character of the text.

About 15% of the text has religious character, the rest presents general advice for life, application of the ten commandments in all day life.

Interesting is the message, that success in life can be achieved by living in line with God's commands.

The origin of the proverbs is deemed to be before king Salomo, who lived in the 9th century B.C., and who was much engaged with wisdom of proverbs. The Book of Proverbs, which represents the first collection, dates back to the period between 500 and 200 B.C.

Other peoples of the middle east, for example the Egyptians, had a culture of proverbs as well. Perhaps the Jews in the time of Moses got acquainted to their proverbs and developed their own.

The Book of Proverbs evidently had been used for education, because some texts begin by „my son“. (for ex. 1.3)

The sustaining influence of this book to European culture is understandable, because it is included within the recognized texts of the Holy Gospel and used in Christian prayers and liturgy.

Some German proverbs have their origin within this book:

“Hochmut kommt vor dem Fall” (Pride goes before a fall) (16.18) or “Wer (anderen) eine Grube gräbt, fällt selbst hinein” (Harm set, harm get) (26.27)

## **2) Proverbs taken from other books of the Old Testament.**

For example:

Auge um Auge, Zahn um Zahn. (Exodus 21; 24)

Es ist nicht gut für den Menschen, dass er allein sei. (Genesis 2)

Alles hat seine Stunde (Kohelet 3.1)

Wenn du einen Freund gewinnen willst, erprobe ihn und trau ihm nicht zu früh. (Sirach, 6,7)  
(Trau, schau, wem...)

Jedes Lebewesen liebt seinesgleichen, jeder Mensch sucht den ihm Ähnlichen (Sirach, 13,15)  
(Gleich und gleich gesellt sich gern...)

## **3) Proverbs taken from the New Testament.**

Der Mensch lebt nicht vom Brot allein (Mt.4, 3-4)

Niemand kann zwei Herren dienen (Mt.6, 24)

Wer sucht, der findet (Lk.11,10)

Der Geist ist willig, aber das Fleisch ist schwach (Mt.26, 41)

An der Frucht erkennt man den Baum (Lk.6, 43)

Wer nicht arbeitet, soll auch nicht essen (Paulus, 2.Brief an die Thessaloniker))

## **4) The role of Latin and Greek language for the distribution of religious proverbs.**

In the period of Hellenism many Jews lived in Greek towns and spoke Greek; therefore the Old Testament had been needed in Greek language.

In the 3rd century B.C. it had been translated from Hebrew into Greek in the new town of Alexandria, known as the „Septuaginta“.

By this translation the Old Testament was readable in the whole Greek speaking world, which means in the whole world of educated people in the period of Hellenism.

So Jewish culture – including the proverbs – had been represented outside the Jewish population as well.

Beginning from the Middle Ages Latin played an analogue role between Christian European countries, because it became the language of liturgy, education and science.

Especially in the period of Humanism Latin was not only the language of the church, but also communication for science and art, which facilitated transfer and exchange of European culture.

The well-known proverb collections by Agricola and Erasmus von Rotterdam were published in Latin and reprinted several times. German proverbs (Heinrich Bebel, Tübingen, about 1508) had been translated into Latin and so transferred to other countries.

### **5.) The importance of Martin Luther for German proverbs.**

Martin Luther wanted to spread Christian faith in the mother language, because only a minority of the population understood Latin. So he translated the Holy Gospel into German, which certainly was responsible for the quick development of Protestantism in Germany. He tried to use a language easily understandable by the common people.

Therefore he liked to contact people on marketplaces and in the streets, „.....because you must not ask Latin letters how to speak German...but you must ask mother at home, the children in the streets, the common guys on the market and look on their mouth, how they speak and then you may translate, so they will understand and notice, that you speak German.....“

(Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen)

Proverbs helped him to do so; therefore he liked to use them preaching, because the people respected proverbs as true and appreciated them.

Luther also quoted proverbs in his texts against catholic theologians and the pope.

He established a collection of 489 proverbs for personal use, published later by Ernst Thiele (1900).

A systematic study of Luther's works found about 1800 proverbs within the texts. (12).

### **6) Analysis of the proverb tables as to the religious origin.**

This analysis seemed to exceed the object of our study, because it would have been necessary to study former time collections and scientific expertises.

As a small contribution we marked in the table of German and Latin proverbs those, which are included in Martin Luther's collection by (L) in the first column.

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